



**HORTENSE
FLEXNER**

SELECTED POEMS
OF
HORTENSE FLEXNER

Selected by Joy Bale
and Harvey Curtis Webster

With an Introduction by
Harvey Curtis Webster

Laurie Lee stated that Hortense Flexner was "... a pure, exact poet who worked with short, hard strokes to create vigorous and inflexible tensions. . . . The words set down are as common as pebbles, but though small, they cast giant shadows."

Selected Poems
Hutchinson Publishing
Group, Limited, London

Marguerite Yourcenar, speaking about Mrs. King's poetry written at Sutton Island, says that the poems are "... crystalizations pure and unsentimental where metaphysical anguish, the horror of the world in general and of the contemporary world as it is, so intensive elsewhere, . . . are marvelously banished."

— *Suivis d'un Choix de Poèmes*
Editions Gallimard, Paris

Harvey Curtis Webster is Emeritus Professor of English Literature at the University of Louisville.

Joy Bale is the editor of *Approaches Magazine*, Elizabethtown, Kentucky.

THE SELECTED POEMS OF HORTENSE FLEXNER

SELECTED BY

JOY BALE AND HARVEY CURTIS WEBSTER

WITH AN INTRODUCTION

BY HARVEY CURTIS WEBSTER



THE UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE
LOUISVILLE, KY.

1975

© UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE
1975

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Committee for Publication wishes to acknowledge the kindnesses of Miss Flexner's friends who have made this volume possible. Those who have assisted immeasurably include Mrs. Maxwell Schubert and Mr. Robert L. Sloss; The Bingham Enterprises Foundation of Kentucky, Incorporated, and Mr. and Mrs. Barry Bingham, Senior; Dr. and Mrs. Robert Dudley Neill, Dr. and Mrs. Harvey Curtis Webster, Dr. and Mrs. Jeremiah P. Starling, Dr. John A. Dillon, Junior, Dr. Rea T. Alsup, and Mr. George T. McWhorter; Mr. David L. Baker, Mr. R. William Flatt, and Mr. Paul B. Ward; Mrs. Julester Post, Mme. Marguerite Yourcenar, Mr. William D. Shepler, Rear Admiral and Mrs. Francis Edward Fleck, and Dr. James Robert Tanis.

The Committee gratefully acknowledges the permissions to use materials from Houghton-Mifflin Company, *Clouds and Cobbles* (1920); MacMillan Publishing Company, *This Stubborn Root* (1930); Coward-McCann & Geohegan, Incorporated, *North Window and Other Poems* (1943); Hutchinson Publishing Group, Limited, *Selected Poems* (1963); and Editions Gallimard, *Presentation Critique d'Hortense Flexner — Suivis d'un Choix de Poèmes* (1969).

The Committee extends its appreciation to the following editorial boards who gave permission to use materials which first appeared in their publications and who lent encouragement to the project: *Approaches Magazine*, *The Bryn Mawr Lantern*, *The Courier-Journal and Louisville Times*, *The Lexington Herald-Leader*, *Harper's*, *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *The New Republic*, *North American Review*, and *Poetry*.

The Committee is most grateful to Mrs. Edward Begley, who assisted in the preparation of the manuscripts, and to Mr. James McGovern, who interceded on our behalf in all the difficult situations.

The poems included herein were the Copyright® of Hortense Flexner in the respective years shown and originally published in the sources indicated. Permission to use all materials was graciously given by the executor and by the heir of Miss Flexner's estate.

"To a Chinese Singer of 1200 B.C." first appeared in *The Courier-Journal* (March 15, 1915) as did "Death Will not Dare" (December 21, 1915). "Abundance" first appeared in *The Lexington Herald-Leader* (June 7, 1940) and was included in the publications of Coward-McCann & Geohegan, Inc., Hutchinson Publishing Group, Ltd., and Editions Gallimard. "Troy, 1915" was first published in *The New York Times* (January 8, 1917).

"Munitions" (1916), "Alien" (1929), and "Four Molds or Seven" (1929) first appeared in *The New Republic*. "Alien" appeared later in the publications of Hutchinson Publishing Group, Ltd., and Editions Gallimard. "The Measure" (1933) first appeared in *The New Yorker* and later appeared in *The New Republic* (1939).

"800,000 Vibrations to the Second" (1940) first appeared in *The New Yorker*. "Divine Plan" (1935) and "Mechanization" (1933) first appeared in *The New Yorker* and were included in the later publications of Hutchinson Publishing Group, Ltd., and Editions Gallimard.

"Children's Ward" (1916) and "For a Child" (1917) were first published in *The Survey*. "Flanders Hill" (1919) and "Return From Captivity" (1924) appeared first in *The Liberator*. *The Courier-Journal* reprinted "Return From Captivity" (August 2, 1948). "Treasure" appeared first in *The Smart Set* (1920). *Scribner's* first published "The Flower of Death" (1925); and "Surfeit" (1926) appeared first in *Voices*. "Green Coat" (1928) was first included in *Forum*, and "The Cock" (1931) appeared first in *The Lyric*.

"Faith" (1916) appeared in September, 1916, in both *Harper's* and *The Literary Digest*. *Harper's* first published "Unlikely Teacher" (1950) and "Plasma" (1952) and gave permission for the inclusions in this volume. "Sand" appeared the same year (1918) in both *Contemporary Verse* and *The Literary Digest*; MacMillan included "Sand" in their 1930 volume. "Minor Poet" (1920) appeared first in *Current Opinion*.

"Death Mask of an Unknown Soldier" (1920) was first in *North American Review*, and later was published by MacMillan Publishing Company and Hutchinson Publishing Group, Ltd. "The Scientist Dies" (1929) was first included

in *Poetry* and was copyrighted by the Modern Poetry Association; it later appeared in the publications of both the Hutchinson Publishing Group, Ltd., and Editions Gallimard. "Extremity" (1930), "The Rod" (1930), "For the Night to Wear" (1943), and "Materialist" (1943) also appeared in the volumes published by Hutchinson Publishing Group, Ltd., and by Editions Gallimard. "— And Strangely Gone" (1930) and "Sealed Word" (1943) appeared in the book published by Hutchinson Publishing Group, Ltd., as well as in the source previously cited. "Mortal Grain" (1943) and "Divine Plan" (1935) appeared in the Hutchinson Publishing Group, Ltd. book and were reviewed by Thomas Howells in *Poetry* following the publication of *North Window* (1943).

"Prowess" (1930) and "In This Way Going" (1963) appeared in the Coward-McCann & Geohegan, Inc., and Editions Gallimard, respectively. Mme. Yourcenar included "This Stubborn Root," from which poem the title of the 1930 book derived, in her critiques published by Editions Gallimard.

"Balsam Fir," "High Sea," and "Old Pier" (all three published in 1961) appeared first in Miss Flexner's privately published and distributed booklet which was printed by Now and Then Press. Mme. Yourcenar included them in her 1969, bilingual, critical survey published by Editions Gallimard.

"The Drafted Mountaineer Salutes" (1918) appeared first in *Contemporary Verse*. As is true of "Plasma," and "Unlikely Teacher," neither has ever appeared in a collection of Miss Flexner's poetry.

CLOUDS AND COBBLESTONES (1920) was published by Houghton-Mifflin Company, Burlington, Massachusetts.

THIS STUBBORN ROOT (1930) was published by MacMillan Publishing Company, New York, New York.

NORTH WINDOW AND OTHER POEMS (1943) was published by Coward-McCann & Geohegan, Incorporated, New York, New York.

POEMS (1961) was privately published and distributed by Miss Flexner and printed by the Now and Then Press, New York, New York.

SELECTED POEMS (1961) was published by Hutchinson Publishing Group, Limited, London, England.

PRESENTATION CRITIQUE d'HORTENSE FLEXNER — SUIVIS d'UN CHOIX DE POÈMES (1969) was published by Editions Gallimard, Paris, France.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION	vii
POEMS FROM <i>CLOUDS AND COBBLESTONES</i> (1920) ..	1
POEMS FROM <i>THIS STUBBORN ROOT</i> (1930)	19
POEMS FROM <i>NORTH WINDOW AND OTHER POEMS</i> (1943)	37
POEMS FROM <i>SELECTED POEMS</i> (1963)	59
POEMS FROM <i>PRESENTATION CRITIQUE</i> <i>d'HORTENSE FLEXNER — SUIVIS d'UN CHOIX</i> <i>DE POÈMES</i> (1969)	65
POEMS FROM <i>HALF A STAR</i> (Previously uncollected or unpublished)	73

in *Poetry* and was copyrighted by the Modern Poetry Association; it later appeared in the publications of both the Hutchinson Publishing Group, Ltd., and Editions Gallimard. "Extremity" (1930), "The Rod" (1930), "For the Night to Wear" (1943), and "Materialist" (1943) also appeared in the volumes published by Hutchinson Publishing Group, Ltd., and by Editions Gallimard. "— And Strangely Gone" (1930) and "Sealed Word" (1943) appeared in the book published by Hutchinson Publishing Group, Ltd., as well as in the source previously cited. "Mortal Grain" (1943) and "Divine Plan" (1935) appeared in the Hutchinson Publishing Group, Ltd. book and were reviewed by Thomas Howells in *Poetry* following the publication of *North Window* (1943).

"Prowess" (1930) and "In This Way Going" (1963) appeared in the Coward-McCann & Geohegan, Inc., and Editions Gallimard, respectively. Mme. Yourcenar included "This Stubborn Root," from which poem the title of the 1930 book derived, in her critiques published by Editions Gallimard.

"Balsam Fir," "High Sea," and "Old Pier" (all three published in 1961) appeared first in Miss Flexner's privately published and distributed booklet which was printed by Now and Then Press. Mme. Yourcenar included them in her 1969, bilingual, critical survey published by Editions Gallimard.

"The Drafted Mountaineer Salutes" (1918) appeared first in *Contemporary Verse*. As is true of "Plasma," and "Unlikely Teacher," neither has ever appeared in a collection of Miss Flexner's poetry.

CLOUDS AND COBBLESTONES (1920) was published by Houghton-Mifflin Company, Burlington, Massachusetts.

THIS STUBBORN ROOT (1930) was published by MacMillan Publishing Company, New York, New York.

NORTH WINDOW AND OTHER POEMS (1943) was published by Coward-McCann & Geohegan, Incorporated, New York, New York.

POEMS (1961) was privately published and distributed by Miss Flexner and printed by the Now and Then Press, New York, New York.

SELECTED POEMS (1961) was published by Hutchinson Publishing Group, Limited, London, England.

PRESENTATION CRITIQUE d'HORTENSE FLEXNER — SUIVIS d'UN CHOIX DE POÈMES (1969) was published by Editions Gallimard, Paris, France.

and Edna St. Vincent Millay's *A Few Figs from Thistles* represented the extremes of public taste. A finer craftsman than Sandburg and a more mature sensibility than Millay, Hortense Flexner, in her expert but sparsely adorned sonnets and quatrains, did not become popular with the public that found Sandburg's social protest comforting and Millay's flip cynicism in accord with the disillusionment that became increasingly fashionable as the Twenties continued.

One needs only to look at the first two poems in Mrs. Bale's and my selection from *Clouds and Cobblestones* to recognize a taut severity that is closer to Hardy's dubious meliorism than to the social hopefulness or too easy despair that characterized her better known contemporaries. "Faith" begins:

If on this night of bitter frost,
I know
That lovely May is true—ah, well,
I shall believe the tales men tell,
Wonders of bliss and asphodel,
And immortality.

"Sand" is "the gray hair of earth,/ Bleached and Wave-beaten,/ That has known the passionate rage of waters,/ White heat of sun,/ And the slow passing of a thousand thousand years." The latter poem, particularly, reflects what Marguerite Yourcenar has called the "almost religious" materialism that characterizes her early poems and differs greatly from the facile atheism one finds in some of the Twenties' writers who were better known.

Similarly, *This Stubborn Root*, Hortense Flexner's second volume, has little kinship with Archibald MacLeish's *New Found Land*, Frost's *Collected Poems*, or T. S. Eliot's *Ash Wednesday*—all published first in 1930. The austerity of the title poem points to the difference:

Ah, blinded root, lie still
Forget the wind, the hill,
Salt sun, the thirsty greed
For rain—forget your need;
Seek in the dark, your fruit,
Lie still, most stubborn root

Of course Miss Flexner was aware of her contemporaries and of their varied goodnesses but her poems rarely resemble theirs. In *Clouds and Cobblestones* there are two poems about war as barbedly acerb as MacLeish's "Memorial Rain"; the tone of her almost religious materialism is as stern as Eliot's Anglo-Catholic admonitions. Like Frost she can be ecstatic, as in her fable about the origin of birds:

Then, looking down,
 And Seeing beauty was as it is,
 The Lord said, "Oh,"
 Which took red wings and flew,
 And the Lord said, "Ah,"
 Which was a bluebird,
 And the Lord drew in his breath
 Whereat the air was thick with song.
 "All birds," said the fable,
 "Are God's exclamation
 At the beauty of the earth."

In *This Stubborn Root*, there are two fine elegiac poems, "The Scientist Dies" and her movingly understated poem about her mother's death:

More than any word they said,
 My mother's hand upon the bed,
 Lying very still and white,
 Told me she was dead.

These unsentimental elegies are counterpointed by such poems as the one about the "foolish day I brought/ The lilac home,/ And had no other care,/ But that its copper jar should just stand there" and "Repression":

Am I so old that I must give no sign
 Of what I see? Older indeed than God,
 Who laughing in the bush, the tree, the vine,
 Is gay enough to decorate the clod.

Still the overriding tone is sombre as the strictures of the scientific attitude and the subjects are more those Lucretius or Hardy would have chosen than those good social poets, such as Horace Gregory or Kenneth Fearing, usually wrote of in the political Thirties. Very probably Miss Flexner, who

wrote for *The Liberator* and the *New Republic* as well as *Poetry* and *The New Yorker*, was as disturbed by the events that led to World War II as the social poets, but the poetry she wrote was reserved usually for the fundamental nature of things as she saw it.

North Window, 1943, shows her in full maturity. In this volume one sees, as David Morton has said, "the product of a scientific mind touched with imagination and a renounced nostalgia; edged, disillusioned, and tender; and the pathos of realism—not the sentimental bathos of it." The range of subject matter widens here and Miss Flexner's command of her craft is such that she dare take risks; carefully wrought sonnets and quatrains mingle with irregularly rhyming verse and free verse. There is a poem about the poet at work at her North Window, "Landscaped with frost and zippered fast with ice," her thoughts exploring, "as mice,/ Reality or a zippered chair." There she may have written "Mechanization," with its bitter veracity about our disabled feelings in times of stress continuously repeated over the radio: "Our instruments are sensitive,/ And it is they that feel." Or it could have been the mutedly hopeful "Conditional" or "Method," about the inadequacy of knowledge that "to date is knowing with more than mind/ What never shall be known." Or "Lost Country," one of her few social poems:

This desperate sorrow is now so shared of all,
That should we speak its name, enumerate
Its various parts, the blinding words would fall
As something hardly worth the pain to start.

Most deftly repetition dulls the shock
Of brute event and stills the anguished tongue. . .

Or her poem that sees genius in God's solving all men's problems finally "with more than sleep." Or "Sealed Word" that finds a promise of life's persistence in the nut trees' "shells locked tight,/ To the frosted mold. . .A sober vow/ Against the too light perishing of leaves." In these poems that display vividly "the pathos of realism," what is basic in the nature of things, is faced so squarely that it seems as though Miss Flexner is approaching a serenity almost Sophoclean.

Hortense Flexner was fifty-eight in the year she published *North Window*. The last of her poems to be published in an American periodical appeared in 1956. Fortunately for us, other countries—or poets and critics there—continued to appreciate her. The distinguished poet, Laurie Lee, introduced a selection of her poems Hutchison published in England in 1963 and Marguerite Yourcenar wrote an extended and intelligent critical discussion of her work Gallimard published in 1969 along with Miss Yourcenar's selection from Hortense Flexner's early and most recent poems. Both agree that what she has written since 1943 is often her best work. Laurie Lee calls her "a pure, exact poet who works with short, hard strokes to create vigorous and inflexible tensions. . . The words set down are as common as pebbles, but though small they cast giant shadows." Two new poems in Laurie Lee's selection illustrate this superbly. "Divine Plan" suggests that even "this tiny beast of dew" is her kin, for there is a "fear to press/ His vitals, measured to the hair,/ Agony that shall fill him like a cup,/ As much as he can bear, Pain fitted to his size." The other poem, "Abundance," counters this sombre surmise of "Divine Plan" with

Life is a flame, tall as a burning spire,
Not coals to crouch beside in nakedness,
Not candle ends, but summer just begun
With never a ticking clock nor setting sun.

Marguerite Yourcenar speaks of her poems about Sutton, the rugged island off the coast of Maine where she and her husband, Wyncie King, spent happy years, the island to which she returned often after his death, as "crystalizations pure and unsentimental where metaphysical anguish, the horror of the world in general and of the contemporary world as it is, so intense elsewhere. . . are marvelously banished." In her poetry, Sutton becomes the happy island where the essential self confronts the cosmos without fear or sentimental rapture. Here she thinks of her death as a serene going "into chill purity of light," from the "Happy Country of Sutton" where "there is no history. . . / No royalty but trees," where Indian pipes "in white transparent robes/ Charred at the edges" seem as if "They had bloomed beyond death." Her admiration here is reserved

for only her husband and for nature in its quintessential nakedness: "Balsam Fir" whose

Hard living taught the bark
And toughened the root.

"An Old Pier" whose

Green piles under the dock
Stand in black water,
Slums of the sea. . .

"A Sea Fog" in which

By moisture held as in pre-natal bath
I live at peace. .

hearing far off "the beating of the sea,/ Or of my mother's heart," become one with nature in a way that resembles that of the Zen-Buddhists, as Marguerite Yourcenar points out, rather than the way of Wordsworth. Even in "High Sea," her eye sees "what it cannot tell":

A sign
As of unleashed love
(Fury to us)
That ordered golden planets to their grooves
And men to breathe,

This austere mysticism, reminiscent of the Buddhist masters she may or may not have read, which finds the meaning of life in both the blow that kills and in the beauty to which we say yes in ecstasy, continues in the poems she wrote during the years since *Poèmes Choisis* appeared. As in "Eyes Domain," the particulars that manifest the universal are keenly observed because they will pass:

Morning, eyes open
To a sharp-cut world;
One summer daisy
Whiter than years of daisies.

Her eyes that see one daisy "whiter than years of daisy" are made more aware because she sees "God's mercy" is not measured "to man's size." She thinks of Caliban as "an obstinate shape":

Hortense Flexner was fifty-eight in the year she published *North Window*. The last of her poems to be published in an American periodical appeared in 1956. Fortunately for us, other countries—or poets and critics there—continued to appreciate her. The distinguished poet, Laurie Lee, introduced a selection of her poems Hutchison published in England in 1963 and Marguerite Yourcenar wrote an extended and intelligent critical discussion of her work Gallimard published in 1969 along with Miss Yourcenar's selection from Hortense Flexner's early and most recent poems. Both agree that what she has written since 1943 is often her best work. Laurie Lee calls her "a pure, exact poet who works with short, hard strokes to create vigorous and inflexible tensions. . . The words set down are as common as pebbles, but though small they cast giant shadows." Two new poems in Laurie Lee's selection illustrate this superbly. "Divine Plan" suggests that even "this tiny beast of dew" is her kin, for there is a "fear to press/ His vitals, measured to the hair,/ Agony that shall fill him like a cup,/ As much as he can bear, Pain fitted to his size." The other poem, "Abundance," counters this sombre surmise of "Divine Plan" with

Life is a flame, tall as a burning spire,
Not coals to crouch beside in nakedness,
Not candle ends, but summer just begun
With never a ticking clock nor setting sun.

Marguerite Yourcenar speaks of her poems about Sutton, the rugged island off the coast of Maine where she and her husband, Wyncie King, spent happy years, the island to which she returned often after his death, as "crystalizations pure and unsentimental where metaphysical anguish, the horror of the world in general and of the contemporary world as it is, so intense elsewhere. . . are marvelously banished." In her poetry, Sutton becomes the happy island where the essential self confronts the cosmos without fear or sentimental rapture. Here she thinks of her death as a serene going "into chill purity of light," from the "Happy Country of Sutton" where "there is no history. . . / No royalty but trees," where Indian pipes "in white transparent robes/ Charred at the edges" seem as if "They had bloomed beyond death." Her admiration here is reserved

And far away on Sutton
The great red sun. . .
Has lifted itself above the horizon,
Spread fire over endless sea and Heaven
To start this day
That I have shredded into senseless bits
With my tongue.

These latest never before published poems are as good or—
if one can discriminate among differing goodnesses—better
than the poems she published in her earlier years. Like
Hardy and Sophocles she sang well in her eighties, without
trickiness, blares, or screeches of metaphor. Her sensibility
continued to pounce on significance with reverent illusion-
lessness. Her poetry makes us prize life that does not need
self-deceit. She makes the half-star of old age something
to anticipate.

Harvey Curtis Webster

CLOUDS AND COBBLESTONES

(1920)

FAITH

*If on this night of still, white cold,
I can remember May,
New green of tree and underbrush,
A hillside orchard's mounting flush,
The scent of earth and noon's blue hush,
A robin's jaunty way;*

*If on this night of bitter frost,
I know such things can be,
That lovely May is true—ah well,
I shall believe the tales men tell,
Wonders of bliss and asphodel,
And immortality.*

SAND

*The sand, which will not hold the print of my foot,
Remembers, none the less,
Choas,
The birth of stars,
And the sunken lines of sea-devoured continents.
It is the gray hair of earth,
Bleached and wave-beaten,
That has known the passionate rage of waters,
White heat of sun,
And the slow passing of a thousand thousand years.*

CHILDREN'S WARD

*She had been sent for — visiting hours were past —
The Lithuanian woman with the blue,
Deep-shadowed eyes. The child's bed was the last,
And as she crossed the room, she knew — she knew.
White-faced she stood, the broad young shoulders drooped
Beneath the hooded gown that visitors wear;
The nurse had left her; suddenly she stooped,
The hood slipped back and showed her braided hair.
There was no cry! The Russians weep and pray,
Italians beat their breasts. This woman turned,
Asked for his clothes, tearless and calm and gray;
The doctor told her they had all been burned.
So she was gone — only her great eyes said,
What thing is lost when a small child is dead!*

TO A CHINESE SINGER OF 1200 B.C.

*Three thousand years! And still your song
Beats in each word I write.
The empty dusk, these yearning hands,
Stars, and the wind in foreign lands,
A fluttering step on opal sands,
Deep eyes that hold the night;*

*All yours! Noon adds no dream to dawn,
Nor soothes the age-old ache;
And yet I hope that first spring day,
Three thousand weary years away,
My sister need not know, nor say,
That hearts will break.*

MASKS

*A pleasant scent is on the steamy air
 Of oils and herbs and soap. Women half sleep
 Before the lighted mirrors while their hair
 Is brushed, or while deft fingers ply and creep
 Over face-muscles or a sagging throat,
 That shows a little yellowish when bare.—
 The room is still, a sunny blind is drawn,
 A chair shifts, or one voice remote
 Drones gossip through a smothered yawn;
 A young girl smiles, tilts up a lovely head
 In a rare way, that makes the attendant note
 How she would lie in bed.*

*Matrons are here, erect, well-cared-for, dressed
 To flash, for all who look, the best
 That may be had in living—
 Furs, motors, servants, warmth and ease,
 All taking, little giving;
 Women cast in a mould half perfume, paste,
 Passionate, idle, kind, in varying degrees,
 Their souls in stays, upright and firmly laced.
 And there are old-maids, frail and over-bred,
 With long-boned hands that twist a silver chain,
 While puffy blondes decide to have, "Instead
 of gold this time, a bit of henna stain."
 And brave old ladies who have lost the fight,
 Yet quite ignore the point,
 Rustle and preen themselves, though dim of sight,
 And very stiff of joint.*

*So they come in, gracious, aloof, serene,
 And sit before the glass in a bright stall,
 And face themselves, as if they had not seen,
 As if it mattered not at all
 How in the glass,
 A certain thing, avoided and put by,
 Comes more and more to pass.
 They sit and turn their heads and vaguely try,
 With an old gesture, and unyielding trace
 Of pride — to cut, ignore, deny
 The gently crumbling face,
 Like a worn mask — that gently drowns here
 Above a fear — a great crude fear,
 A half seen thing,
 Such as rude peasants know, who front the black,
 Strange night, with club and sling,
 Hearing draw near, by leaves and twigs that crack,
 Some prowling thing!*

A FABLE

*In the beginning
There were no birds,
According to a fable
Of most doubtful origin.
Even after the seventh day
There were no birds
To sing!
Until, long after,
The Lord, having rested well,
Was in mood to visit His work,
To measure what He had done!
Then, looking down,
And seeing beauty was as it is,
The Lord said, "Oh,"
Which took red wings and flew,
And the Lord said, "Ah,"
Which was a bluebird,
And the Lord drew in his breath.
Whereat the air was thick with song.
"All birds," said the fable,
"Are God's exclamation
At the beauty of the earth."*

TROY, 1915

*Past the gray shore, faint in the mist as when
The shadow ships lay high in drifted sand,
Swing the dim dreadnoughts, bearing hosts of men,
To hurl new ruin and blight upon this land
Of ancient wars, where death still lies in wait,
And restless winds bring echoed cries and calls,
Where on the vacant plain, those who watch late,
Hear the dull boom of falling towers and walls.*

*What fires, dust-smouldering, flare? What quarrel now,
For beauty wronged, stirs passionate strength to smite?
What lover with fair talk and broken vow
Steals from his host's door laughing in the night?
Helen, sleep well! No woman's yearning lips,
Nor eyes, love-weary, launch these deadly ships!*

MINOR POET

*It is not that you had only one
Very good thought,
Great men survive, as a rule.
By not more than five — sometimes seven.
But they have a way of riding at beauty
With a lifted spear,
And at truth with a sword.
In a cloud of flame and battle they ride —
And their hands are torn.
And you — you said a great many things,
With one good one.
But there are no high, invisible banners
Waving about your words;
There is no mist in your throat,
And the stars do not choke you!*

FOR A CHILD

*I do not know what day I came away
From that quaint shining country where you find
Fair things so near; trees that bend down to play,
White mushroom tables where the elves have dined
Beside the door, while you were fast asleep;
And everywhere strange moving things to touch,
A shadow leaf to hold, but not to keep,
And little furry animals to clutch.*

*Yet sometimes, when I listen to you tell
Of this gay land; the moon that follows you
Into the house, the goblin with his bell,
All silvery at night; to-morrow, what you'll do;
I marvel, since the light may fall so gray;
I did not know — that day I came away.*

DEATH-MASK OF AN UNKNOWN SOLDIER

*Death is dark sleep and death is very still,
Yet in this sleeping face, shadowed, too lean,
There lives a little smile aloof and chill,
A little mocking smile that lurks between
The even lips firm-sealed, final in stone,
And the nostril's subtle lift; the eyes are stern,
And in their hollows dark all pain is shown;
Yet the face smiles in gentle unconcern.*

*Something he knew too surely as he came
To the narrow door, with youth upon his head,
Something he saw, as by a livid flame,
Paltry, amusing, commonplace instead
Of what he'd thought; and so he closed his eyes.
The dead should not be cynical and wise.*

FLANDERS HILL

*A forest of sharp skeletons flame-seared,
They stand above the hill, the ancient trees,
A waste of broken trunks the shells have cleared
Of swaying branch and leaf and woodland ease.*

*So still they are, the Spring shall turn aside,
Summer shall never touch their blackened sleep,
They know — they know earth's laughing heart has died,
The ancient trees, whose roots have pierced so deep.*

TREASURE

*The little pilfering hands of hours and days
Bury much loveliness and treasured gold,
Savor and essence, cloud and warm scent and haze,
Small things accustomed, all too frail to hold.
But I would have remembrance full and keen,
Nor yield one leaf, or cloud, or shadow's blue,
One little thrusting wind, one hill's tall green,
The outer way of wonder we passed through.*

*The fear grows with me that I shall forget,
Never your love, but half-seen things of grace,
Beauty we took and marveled at and set
Aside, half blindly, marking not its place;
This wealth put by, this gold too faint and rare,
I cannot count — and yet, I cannot spare.*

DEATH WILL NOT DARE

*Of all the cloudy armies that have passed
Down the gray earth, there is no soul that knew
To vanquish death; but each alone, at last,
Has felt a weariness, a wind that blew
Heavy with sleep — and so has laid him down.
Robert the Strong, whose spear no man could hurl,
Richard and William of the Dreadful Frown,
Have slept with glassy eyes, as might a churl.*

*But I, who still am warm and breathe the air,
Cannot believe this dim unlikely end.
Those others have been trapped! Death will not dare
To come to me, low-whispering, as a friend;
This body that I am can never lie
So heedless and so chill, as those who die.*

MUNITIONS

*He wrapped the blunt-nosed thing and took
Its brother from the tray,
And that he wrapped — then more and more,
All shining, blunt-nosed by the score,
And wrapped them so all day.*

*His neighbor laid them in a box,
Another fixed the lid;
The work was swift, and many hands,
Of sundry men of sundry lands,
Did it, as they were bid.*

*And what they knew of blunt-nosed things,
No word, nor shrews glance said;
The work was theirs — this much was good,
For men must live and have their food,
Though other men lie dead!*

FOREIGN NEWS

*From half across the world
These yellowish, strangely printed papers come,
Pages too tightly furled,
With tales I know of slaughter and pogrom —
I slip into my chair, tilt higher
A low light at my elbow. But the tea
Is still too hot to drink, and so I skim
Headings that wail of exile, murder, fire,
Of laden backs slow passing to the sea,
Bent figures hurt in fiber, mind, and limb.*

*I think I do not see what things I read,
Or else I could not read and slowly sip
Comforting tea. This hunger and this need
Touch me with horror — and yet feebly slip
Into a cache,
An area off-focus, not quite true.
I cannot think that I
Would shake lean starving fingers from my dress,
And pass old women crouching in the street,
Or shapeless dead — pass calmly by
And stare quite through
Their ancient woe and tears and blind distress,
To come indoors to eat!*

FOR THE UNKNOWN AUTHOR OF
HUMPTY-DUMPTY

*You did not think to write your name
Across the jingle that has strayed
Down centuries — a song, a game
The tiny ones of earth have played.*

*By some swift sign they greet and know
Your solemn hero as a friend,
They hang upon his tale of woe,
And laugh — despite his tragic end.*

*A hundred times each day he dies,
Unaided by the King's good men;
And yet he lives in wondering eyes,
The small hands make him whole again.*

DEGENERATE

*A drowsy butterfly
With frail blue-spotted wings,
And the circling gesture
Of a scented fan
Swung by a delicate wrist —
Hovers over the weeds
At the edge
Of the garbage dump.*

THIS STUBBORN ROOT

(1930)

ALIEN

*I saw a strange lost beast,
Unearthly, fire-fleeced,*

*Chained to a muddy ring,
Lie down, an alien thing.*

*In a narrow yard unkept,
I saw this shame and wept.*

*And then, by some dark law,
Twin to the beast, I saw*

*My alien mind, my will
Come each day meek and still,*

*Come each wide night afresh,
Home to the house of flesh,*

*To take grim orders, wear
Old insult and despair,*

*And lie down tame at last,
To the muddy stake made fast.*

GREEN COAT

*This green coat flung across the chair,
Tells me this much of you,
Warm veins, quick hands, all youth to spare,
And reckless things to do.*

*The aged smooth their clothes and spread
Them gently, one by one,
Fold them away quite spent and dead,
Or hang them in the sun.*

*These empty sleeves that twist and strive,
Lines that deny repose,
Are warmer and as much alive
As some men in their clothes.*

THIS STUBBORN ROOT

*This slender orchard shoot,
Has a most stubborn root.*

*Though levelled to the ground,
It leaps, with one green bound*

*Into the light in Spring,
And stands, a bitten thing,*

*Remembering not the knife,
Nor wounds — but only life.*

*Ah, blinded root, lie still,
Forget the wind, the hill,*

*Salt sun, the thirsty greed
For rain — forget your need;*

*Seek in the dark your fruit,
Lie still, most stubborn root.*

FOUR MOULDS OR SEVEN

*If I could chart my life by days, not years,
There might be four or seven perhaps, at most,
To give the range of what my spirit hears,
The neatly bounded area where my ghost
In flesh or out of it has travelled — staid;
Four moulds or seven to hold all beauty, heat,
Panic and blinded eyes and hands afraid;
Rhythms recurring with no missing beat.*

*They weary me; I know them as they start,
But I can think of lives so stormy, vast,
That boundaries are broken and the chart
Is lost in patterns new until the last;
Not squared as mine and measured long ago,
With but one left whose end I do not know.*

PROWESS

*Let it be invisible,
We shall see and hear as well.*

*Let it hide in ways unknown,
We shall teach it to cut stone.*

*If it lives where planets reel,
We shall make it turn a wheel;*

*And call it from the plunging roar
Of cataracts, to close a door.*

*After us, let it be said,
"They taught the whirlwind to bake bread;*

*"Gave mute space a clacking tongue,
"Gave the smothering sea a lung,*

*"Made the mountain tie their shoes,
"The lightning walk by two and twos;*

*"And worshipped high above the square,
"Wonder, in a blue plush chair."*

— “AND STRANGELY GONE.”

*More than any word they said,
My mother's hand upon her bed,
Lying very still and white,
Told me she was dead.*

*I knew it was not she who slept,
I saw the distance that had swept
Between us like a sea —
I knew then why I wept.*

*And all of earth that I had known,
Seemed turned to ice or timeless stone,
Stopped with my mother's hand,
And strangely gone.*

REPRESSION

*Am I so old that I must give no sign
Of what I see? Older indeed than God,
Who laughing in the bush, the tree, the vine,
Is gay enough to decorate the clod?*

THE SCIENTIST DIES

*And if death came, the veiled archaic shape,
Too crudely representing visible doom,
He would, if he were wise, drop cowl and cape,
Crossing the threshold of this narrow room.
For he who dies has known his visitor
In other forms, watched him without his mask,
A series of small changes — nothing more,
Working his tricks by daylight in a flask.
How could death play at panic, pose and stride
Before an eye, that even as it slept,
Knew him for something tiny, multiplied
In a bright ring of light — a horde that crept
Through a half drop of blood, a moving smear,
That might be many things, yet hardly fear.*

MAN

*Why should this tribe that crowds the earth,
Slow risen from the ape,
Give death its skeleton to wear,
And God its fleshy shape?*

I SHALL WEAR RED

*I shall wear red, feel gold about my neck,
Drive on spring nights down roads I shall not see
In any year again; stand on a deck
And look by stealth at hands that are to me
A restless mystery — oh, I shall live
My measured time, set my eyes food and drink,
Savoring this and that, and doubtless give
Much that I now put down in blackest ink
To a less definite dark — but this shall last,
With something fresh and sudden in the thought,
The hint of breath upon it and the cast
Of intimate sun — this foolish day I brought
The lilac home, and had no other care,
But that its copper jar should stand just there.*

THE ROD

*I too was a leafy branch,
How many springs ago?
But the frost stripped me bare,
Year after year;
The ice polished me
To a rod.
Now laid to the flesh of youth,
I should draw blood.*

THE DOCTOR

*He was agnostic — so he always said
With what he could of faith — but he had seen
Too near the long indifference of the dead,
To have much hope of gathering between
The stars, the scattered bit of warmth that made
A body what it had been here before.
The soul? Perhaps — surely wise men had played
With the idea and never reached the core.*

*Yet he could argue on the other side
When there was need, and make a good case too.
I heard him once, the day his neighbor died,
But noted why his argument fell through.
Those rational eyes that peered into black night,
And somehow knew the fools could not be right.*

FOREWARNING

*I heard feet hurrying overhead,
Felt panic touch me through the wall,
Long long I knew that you were dead,
Before I heard them call,
And slowly climbed the dwindling stair,
With vacancy above — beneath,
Grappling with the unwilling air,
I knew you did not breathe.*

THE FLOWER OF DEATH

*The flower of autumn is a perilous bloom,
Rooted in death, unfolding by the grace
Of frost and blackening winds; a feverish down
Is on the leaves that hang as luminous lace
Against the sky, and in the scarlet drift
Beside the curb; each hour the hurrying sound
Of the last storm may come, and trees shall sift
Their reeling gold like stars along the ground.*

*But now there is a pause that tensely holds,
A timeless moment, when as by consent,
The sun strikes for the sap, renews and folds
The earth in flame, the drowsy earth too spent
To heed, yet prone and lovely still to bear
The flower of death, full-petalled on the air.*

RETURN FROM CAPTIVITY

*After the longest exile they return,
Men who have hung their harps on willow-trees
Of many lands, and wept in dark sojourn
Beside all waters flowing to all seas;
Their feet are crowding down the sacred road,
Prophets in rags, starved seers and minstrels dumb,
Marked by their toil, scarred by the thong and load,
They lift their eyes unto the hills and come.*

*The Joppa gate swings wide, they shall go in,
Before their sight the Temple walls shall rise,
Nor hammer stroke be heard for the proud din
Of hearts and praises lifting to the skies.
How old a dream strikes root upon this day,
They only know who face the Ark to pray.*

WINTER NIGHT

*A million men who would have loved this night
As I, are lying sightless in their graves.
I think of them to give an added height
To consciousness, the sense of life that craves
A thousand years for seeing stars so lost,
In such black wastes above the crusted snow,
Or trees so sharp, held by the strangling frost,
Or fire so driven to cover, burning low.*

*Of all earth's glittering hours, this is the least,
It has the touch and pace of what shall die.
There is no spark within for bird or beast,
Only such beauty as the dead and I
Have watched, the sightless dead beneath a stone,
And I beneath a star-set sky alone.*

NORTH WINDOW AND OTHER POEMS

(1943)

THE MEASURE

*Now frail the flower and strong the weed,
The shaggy vine sprawls on the ledge,
The spider's rope, the bearded seed
Float on still air to strike the hedge.*

*In space, magnetic pull and ray
Have made earth stagger and turn back;
But here the blue grape points the way
A planet keeps its curving track.*

*Not as we bind the stalk and sheaf
The abstract tasks of sky are done,
Yet at my door the shrivelled leaf
Measures the long step of the sun.*

MECHANIZATION

*The photographic plate makes clear
Events we like to think remote;
By short-wave we can nicely hear
Breath in the diplomatic throat.*

*Informed of all, we sleep and live,
Nor quiver as do threads of steel —
Our instruments are sensitive,
And it is they that feel.*

NORTH WINDOW

*Landscaped with frost and zippered fast with ice,
The window in the north admits the stare
Of sunless sky. The clock shall change but twice
To tell of time and the chill light lay bare
A steadfast scene, where thoughts explore as mice,
Reality or a disabled chair.*

THE CLOCK

*In the black hour the friendly cock did cry,
And from the iron city where I lay,
I heard his petty trumpet in the sky,
His single word that darkness should be day.*

*And I who would have stopped the tick of the clock
The sun as well, because of what I knew,
Took courage from the courage of the cock,
Who only did what he was used to do.*

*And listening to his boast by sunlight taught,
His loud promiscuous comfort, I knew how
To echo him — to draw from practiced thought
A frozen sun to gild the frozen bough.*

THE THREAD

*Long after the used senses abdicate
The flickering scene of the mind
Leaving their tangled wires burned black;
And after memory, usurper, good to hate
Tinkering with what is slack
And dead, takes up his bare estate,
Keeping all windows blind —
Still in the withered fibre of the brain,
Lives a bright nerve, a cable freshly fed,
The sensitive high-voltage wire of pain,
A humming, brutal thread,
That signals what worn flesh now reads as clear,
As once new fervor, hunger, lust or fear.*

FORMULA

*I saw the flesh that made the lover burn,
The eyes that sent him like a hound astray
Over wan hills, the hands for whose return
He shall be waiting on the judgment day;
Here were the colors and the measurements
Required for his ruin, the sure accord
Of properties to blind him, eye and sense,
The atom edged to slaughter like the sword.*

*For granting all her grace, there stands at last
Only a formula — she, the pre-destined whim
Of his delight — grown, strange, portentous, vast —
Equation dark, how personal to him,
Of Beauty lost, earth rent, the Heavens void!
X equals A — and so, he is destroyed.*

CONDITIONAL

*But if the reason were that implement
We claim, should we not learn
Without this long apprenticeship,
This playing of the fool,
To look beyond earth's beauty blindly sent,
Discount false fires that burn
In the brain; convert the plastic lip
To truth, if not the eye?*

*And should we not at last apply the rule
Of the foredoomed earth, with silence and restraint
To our lost selves? Measure the personal cry
Against the fallen leaf;
Note the worn cliff, and so choke down complaint?
Oh, should we not root from us hope and grief,
If reason were that tempered edge
We claim, and unafraid
To still the soul's loud talk of privilege
With its indifferent blade?*

MORNING-GLORY

*To argue from the design in the morning-glory
To the intention of Eternity
Is not permissible.
The material in the star-webbed flower
Is more obedient to law
Than the stuff of the soul,
Where the wild ungovernable molecule,
The untamed particle
Destroys with its presence
In the design and texture of your face,
My effort to simplify
God.*

SURFEIT

*I am betrayed by multiplicity
And crowded to the wall by my own kind;
If I should smile, ten thousand eyes agree,
If I would shout my woe I cannot find
An empty space to weep. About me walk
The shapes whose substance is my very own,
While beauty blooms a dozen to the stalk,
And death is common as a paving stone.*

*But this I know beyond complaint and curse,
That Adam once cast forth to find his place
Upon an empty star, knew nothing worse
Than in his mind the crowding of God's face;
And that a galley slave on endless seas
Had for horizon his own straining knees.*

LOST COUNTRY

*This desperate sorrow is now so shared of all,
That should we speak its name, enumerate
Its various parts, the blinding words would fall
As something hardly worth the pain to state.*

*Most deftly repetition dulls the shock
Of brute event and stills the anguished tongue;
How shall we question God and cry and knock
Our foreheads on the ground, a million strong?*

MORTAL GRAIN

*When from the narrow cage
Where it has housed,
The soul creeps faint and light,
I think it will not be too soon aroused
To measure its new height,
Nor leave its prison in a shining rage.
For as the furrowed kernel lying cramped
In the nut's hard shell,
Bears the deep imprint of the outer case,
So shall the soul be stamped
With the harsh flesh, where in a scanty space,
By heaviness possessed,
It learned to dwell.
Scored by the mortal grain,
The soul shall, even as the body rest,
Its duplicate, awake, remembering pain.*

METHOD

*Knowledge to date is knowing with more than mind
What never shall be known. Only as we
With the near-sighted eye forecast and find
Chips of perfection, white grains of symmetry,
But never a glimpse of the working hand discover —
Only as we press back the dark and flaw
Of ignorance, shall the sick brain's lightning hover
Above the charged simplicity of law.*

*Not with a will to force but to evade
The magnitude, must we draw to our task —
Put whole things by, let beauty be mislaid,
Break vanity to atoms, dare to ask
And learn — not of the planets in their stations,
But of the fruit-fly in its generations.*

PROBLEM AND ANSWER

*To conjure life into a lonely waste
Of mud or ice, required a force more blind
With lust and strength, than the far-seeing God
We credit in the prayer-book, and yet
To have added death must prove the whirl-wind kind,
The tempest not a moment of black haste,
Creation not a stirring in the clod —
But genius, once the problem had been set,
To bring it to conclusion in one sweep,
And solve the subtle trick with more than sleep.*

THIN COMMAND

*The cut in the aged finger heals,
Mechanic blood, quick to repair,
Draws tight the juiceless skin and seals
The unimportant tear.*

*But the unhindered breach within,
No steady toil of cell makes whole,
The body's old command rings thin,
When the injury is the soul.*

800,000 VIBRATIONS TO THE SECOND

*This detail from the thesis falls
Without a crash into the air;
The speaker's pointer pauses, crawls
Across the board, the listeners there
Accept the fact that he has reckoned
The doings of this freighted second.*

*And we, whose coarse-grained hours show clear
On the vacant clock with slow hands turning,
To tell the time of soul or year,
The lower gone, the dry leaves burning —
Jot down vast happenings in a phrase,
Neat understatement of God's ways.*

MINOR MISHAP

*Think of my death
As that of a fly
Caught between window and screen
On an autumn night.
Neither in or out,
He perishes of weakness
And hostile cold,
Looking through a barrier,
Perfect in perversity
At a glowing candle, whose warmth he cannot feel,
At a table set, whose meats he cannot reach.*

SIXTH DAY

*Straight to the rabbit's nest,
Hidden in bleached grass, blanketed with fur,
Went the child's hand,
And lightly burrowing under
The barricade of draggled leaf and burr,
Committed plunder.*

*The fingers found and brought into the chill,
A hairless creature panting under skin
So new to air, it still
Wore the cramped posture of the dark within
The body where it grew —
A secret, shivering thing,
That in its black sleep knew
The novelty of wrong and suffering.*

*Who seeks to win the mother rabbit's blind
Unguarded spawn to a sense of ease,
Must learn his manners, not of human kind,
But of the Sixth Day's veiled amenities.*

TRESPASSERS

*Old men upon the wall of Troy
Knew the word that would destroy*

*Their chilly peace, and faces gray
Know the self-same word today.*

*Age grips the earth; in subtle grooves
We drive the plunging iron hooves,*

*And toil with lean gratuitous hand
To order what shall never stand.*

*But when the lovers pass, we start
And move, as trespassers, apart.*

*Their clumsy fingers on the flower
Cry out we overstay the hour:*

*The singing lip, the indolent eye,
Without intention, bid us die,*

*And passion, claiming nothing, owns
From sky to deep foundation stones.*

*Only for lovers, sage or fool,
God set a fiery star to cool.*

MATERIALIST

*If to the discard man's concealed machine
Is lightly tossed; if the industry of the gland,
The workmanship of blood — all the unseen
And personal universe that the finest hand
Shall never have the wit to demonstrate,
Is casual waste; if the body's toil and power
Shall but restore and not rejuvenate,
Seeing the end is known unto the hour —*

*How then shall that which feeds on the miracle,
Man's own part in himself, the fractional soul,
The tenant, not the landlord of the cell
Be salvaged for its worth, when the functioning whole,
The manifold interweaving of the obscure
Law-governed flesh and bone shall not endure?*

KIND

*The close green hedge, as table set
With gold, has caught the pointed leaves;
The beech and linden now are met,
Their mingled color earth receives.*

*But in the twilight's rolling mist,
When kindled fires through low mounds reach,
The glowing skeletons insist
"But I was oak" and "I was beech."*

SEALED WORD

*Not by the Spring,
 Nor the sun-doubled scent
 Of lilac, heavy-headed;
 Not by the wing
 Of the secret thrush, nor new leaf bent
 And dropping like a tired hand at the wrist,
 Not by the thicket threaded
 With beads in a green mist,
 We are persuaded earth is never spent;*

*But when in the Autumn night,
 The thinning nut trees, hazel, oak and beech,
 Send down their shells locked tight,
 To the frosted mold,
 Or sharp precarious ledge —
 We trust this speech;
 The haunted mind receives
 From root and bough,
 A word so sealed to last against all cold.
 The sound of heavy dropping is a pledge,
 A sober vow
 Against the too light perishing of leaves.*

SELECTED POEMS

(1963)

EXTREMITY

*As a bright fish reeled in at last,
The double hook within my throat,
I see tall waters running past,
The shadow and the stone I note.*

*Terror is mine, and all that I
Have learned to fear in sleep or play.
But the blue water running by
Is sweet as on another day.*

*This hurrying moment shall be dark,
The shaking of the reeds I see,
But the kind water bears no mark
Of my extremity.*

DIVINE PLAN

*This grain of life, this tiny beast of dew
Climbing the grass, transparent, hardly won
From vegetable growth to sight and sense,
Is far too small, too new
To touch, save in his movement to the sun,
A man's experience.
His appetites, his frenzy, zeal and sin
Are mysteries too invisible to guess;
And yet, since on the grass he dares mount up,
I hazard of his life this one surmise
And claim him kin —
Such as he is, there is a fear to press
His vitals, measured to the hair,
Agony that shall fill him like a cup,
As much as he can bear,
Pain fitted to his size.*

FOR THE NIGHT TO WEAR

*For the twilight, the wet snow,
Heaped on the branch,
The soft white blurring with solids
All angles and edges.
But the dry snow,
Granular,
Sand out of space,
Jewel cut,
Is for the night to wear.
Polished aloft in the metaphysical tides
That swirl between stars,
Its meanings are other
Than the frozen rain of a low cloud.*

*Orion's belt, hung in the fork
Of the stripped beech
Is kin to this snow,
Restless on eaves and fence-rails,
Fanned like the plume of Everest,
To make visible
The polar wind.*

ABUNDANCE

*Things I have wasted, cast aside and lost
Out of great plenty and a mind to play,
Are with me in this time of counting cost,
Red ink I love across the ledger's gray.
There has been beauty that I would not see,
Being drowsy, dull or busy at a book,
Years like ripe fruit, rotting beneath a tree,
Moonlight I slept away, friends I forsook.*

*What does it matter that I still have fire
To warm me till I die, or something less?
Life is a flame, tall as a burning spire,
Not coals to crouch beside in nakedness,
Not candle ends, but summer just begun,
With never a ticking clock nor setting sun.*

PRESENTATION CRITIQUE d'HORTENSE FLEXNER
SUIVIS d'UN CHOIX DE POÈMES
(1969)

IN THIS WAY GOING

*I know how it will be,
Something remembered, loved,
Around me,
The very presence of an island
Revisited in dreams,
Now near.*

*In this hour
Nothing unfamiliar, nothing strange
(The breast of my mother was not strange);
And I shall go surely
Into chill purity of light,
Widening eddies of space
Where the stars hang —
A vast translucence,
Thirsty as a desert,
To drink the tiny beam
Of my soul.*

HAPPY COUNTRY

*There is no history here,
No royalty but trees,
Nor chronicle but what the gulls can read
Of sea at war with rock;
This island was not worth a king's possessing —
Its harsh, fog-dripping face set to the North
Warned mariners off.*

*We never know on what uncertain land
Our houses rest, until we see the great spruce overturned
With rings for eighty years, its green life fed
By little dangling roots that came away
When the hurricane pushed.*

*Stern country — all too poor for man's contentment.
The Indian did not stay but left his path.*

INDIAN PIPES

*Where the moss curls in the shade
Stand the strangers;
A clump of ghosts, timid, heads bowed,
Mournful as moonlight
On a slanting tombstone.
Very secret they are,
In white transparent robes
Charred at the edges;
In their beauty unearthly,
As if Lazarus had plucked them
In that other country;
As if, indeed,
They had bloomed beyond death.*

BALSAM FIR

*Hard living taught the bark
And toughened the root
Of a tree
Whose fruit and blossom
Are a wood carving,
Whose bristled foliage
On the sunniest day of summer
Forms angles of snow crystals.*

OLD PIER

*These green piles under the dock
Stand in black water,
Slums of the sea,
Where a fish head, a bit of rope,
Or slimy weed
Swing amid oily shadows.
Low waves on barnacles
Work up and down
Like an old man's stubbled jaws.*

SEA-FOG

*By moisture held as in pre-natal bath
I live at peace.
Senses are dulled, unneeded now;
Porch rail and pebbled path
Are furled in fleece;
Bird-song is gone with the bough;
Muted the harbor bell as it would cease.
The dripping stair,
The rock, have lost all form,
My hand its will.
Blank — blank and white the air;
The self, compressed and still,
Asks but to be
Of unseen earth and sky the smallest part.
Far off I hear the beating of the sea,
Or of my mother's heart.*

HIGH SEA

*Watchful in house of matches on the cliff,
Unlike the granite that absorbs the shock
Of ocean's timed assault,
The eye of man
Sees what it cannot tell —
A sign
As of the unleashed love
(Fury to us)
That ordered golden planets to their grooves
And men to breathe.*

HALF A STAR

(Previously Uncollected or Unpublished Poems, 1918-1973)

EYE'S DOMAIN

*Morning, eyes open
 To a sharp-cut world;
 One summer daisy
 Whiter than years of daisies;
 One winter moon
 To stand for all the silver;
 An autumn parting, leaf-dust under foot
 To give the changing woods
 A life-long sadness.*

*And this veiled hour —
 Then call it age,
 When years are telescoped,
 And shapeless dust
 Blurs time's pale milestones
 On forgotten roads —*

*Still, still the eye
 Leaps to its toil,
 Accepts its state,
 Humble in ecstasy,
 With this for truth —
 Closer the watching, more the mystery;*

*And less the understanding,
 More the love —
 The eyes' domain
 Enough and all.*

WARNING

*If any ask God's mercy, let his back
Be strong, as braced against a cliff;
For man's petition granted, may be sent
In ways to shatter being —
And ease of pain may come in greater pain,
The first woe shrunk,
Forgotten in the new.*

*Not measured to man's size the monstrous grain
Of Heavenly pity, wrapped in cloud,
Or under angel's vast, sky-spanning wing
That darkness light;
Until one feather drifting down,
Brings dew of freshness and forgetfulness
To touch his grief at last.*

"LIKE WRONGS HUSHED UP" —

*The witch's son, fogged with the beast
Knew beyond lust, what ailed his kind,
When beauty working like a yeast
Pierced through the hull to touch the mind.*

*But what of him whose obstinate shape
Describes forever Caliban,
Seeming to ponder angel rape —
The brute inhabited by man?*

HALF A STAR

*When the maimed speak to the maimed
And to them only,
The whole are silent.
Words are twisted to pattern,
Weariness marries guilt —
The rest is torn away,
Lost in a blind eye,
Told in a stammer.*

*Half a star is their portion,
Not a good star either,
Running blood and pride —
But the maimed are well pleased:
Half an eye for seeing,
Half a mouth for speaking:
"Look! A new world!"
"We are creators too!"*

*Have they not made it
With their stumps of fingers,
Their tainted dreams?
The applause is welcome,
And the empty who have never eaten
Cry, "Hear! Hear!"*

TRAPPERS

*In seeking bait, we learn to please,
Who trap for food or game or pleasure,
Know well the meat, the fly, the cheese
To take shy hunger's savage measure —
But man, the hunter fleeing fate
Makes for himself both trap and bait.*

LOVE POEM

*Creating me as I am,
Well was it done by you, oh Lord,
To weight me here
With the single charge I should love and never afford
To live without. Long since prying
Into the tight and folded substance of me,
You saw the germ of hatred and denying,
The will to reject fair fruit of a twisted tree.*

*How simple then
To bend my strong intent;
I who would never have been detained,
Not by bewildering spring, or the sun-doubled scent
Of lilac in its prime — no, not by any beauty;
Demanding other meaning, fulfillment, guerdon,
Yet easily persuaded and misled
By the greatness of your prize, your gift, your burden.*

GALE

*Let the men trying space
Tear among the nebulae,
Lose body-weight, float as paper,
Still they must breathe earth's air,
In a small capsule.*

*But on this fretted island
The frozen wastes of sky
Come with the Northeast gale;
Here clinging to a porch post,
I savor infinity
And nibble at a star.*

ADAM
(In an Art Gallery)

*Not Angelo's too placid vacant man,
Made perfect out of clay,
Waiting in still non-being for a soul —
But Blake's accusing vision,
Adam forced
Into a dream of sin before he wakes;
Before earth's dust had clotted on his bones
He suffered of his guilt.*

*This is the shape of man,
Him do we know,
Sick as in either's sickness,
Narrowly held,
By that first serpent coiled from heels to head,
Yet brooded on by Elohim's fierce love,
That waits for tremor in the prisoned flesh
With doubt and hope.*

SHAKING PEN

*We are acquainted with ruin
In this age;
We have trodden rubble.
But the hand-writing of my friend,
Scalloped by an inner tremor
Shows a more complex ruin.
Here the foundation has sunken slowly,
And deep controls under strain invisible
Have relaxed,
In an earthquake without shock,
A lasting shudder.*

THIS OTHER SLEEP

*After the nine months' sleep
The unconscious birth,
We wake to what consoles us for the loss
Of the dreaming dark.
In fold on fold of love,
Cradled and welcome now,
The trusting self
Takes hold on life.*

*What then awaits
The new-born dead,
After ejection from this other sleep
Where no rest was?
What can be kind enough
To meet us stumbling from the heavy grip
Of the repeated hour?
What win us to begin,
Wash the frayed nerves,
And clothe defeat
In morning light?*

FOR ALL TO SEE

*I resent wearing a clock
In my face,
To tell the passer-by
What time it is in my soul.*

ADVICE

*Said sluggish ear to straining eye,
"Be calm; your fears are for the weak";
What if I trembled at each cry!"
And then, there came the shriek.*

THE DRAFTED MOUNTAINEER SALUTES

*The high and silent hills are part of him,
He knows the creek-bed road, the tug and sway
Of pines above the mountains' windy rim,
The touch of dawn and dusk. His unmarked day
He used to spend working the rusty ground
Beside his hut, or resting at the door,
Few words he had for men — the peaks around
Gave him companionship and something more.
Here in the training camp he can not find
His world; orders and uniform are strange,
He tries to learn, but is too slow, too blind
With distance and the sleeping skies to change —
When he salutes, for all the noise, the crowd,
It is as if a hill had gravely bowed*

PLASMA

*To match blood as ribbon
Without a seam
Is unearthly shopping.
For who would have thought
These veins, so breached to air,
Keyed to the final,
Ice-rimmed by death
And carrying life to last escape —
Should be healed by this,
This steady
Market product,
Well packaged, neat,
Guaranteed to flow smoothly
For seventy years?*

OVER SIMPLIFIED

*Abstractions to a lonely eye
Grow intimate as hedge and stone,
Democracy, to boys who die,
Wears shorts and eats an ice cream cone.*

UNSCORED POEM

*Easy to wrap for closet shelf
What eighteen years of life puts by,
But harder to dismantle self,
And better not to try.*

EPITAPH

*The grain of dust she harried all her life,
Drove from the chair, slew on the closet shelf,
Triumphed at last, when death, a slack house-wife,
Turned her into a heap of dust itself.*

PURITAN

*But when they are most good,
They work most ill,
Self twisted, gnarled like wood —
An implement to kill.*

UNLIKELY TEACHER

*Now a late riser like the autumn fly,
I buzz at noon and take an early nap;
We know, he with his hundredth dulling eye
And I with two, how thinly runs the sap
In the apple tree and why the spider dares
Balloon his web across the sharp, slant gold
Of early setting sun. The coarse week fares
Too well among his betters when nights are cold.
Hard truth we've learned — the fly in his corner fasting,
I in my sheltered chair, we had not guessed —
In longer days, when leaves seemed everlasting,
And the thrush sang three late notes, but those the best —
A minstrel's moral, outweighing the ant's stable crumb,
To take the dwindling moments as they come.*

AND EVEN HERE —

*The frosty Spring
With starving promises
Brings from this rough infertile earth
A quilt of nameless flowers;
Fluted cups, tiny bells, fringes
On frail short stems;
In their bright horde so sweet
They scent the air.
Not one alone stands forth;
It is enough to send a choral note
To swell the tune
Of May.*

WINTER DAWN

*And far away on Sutton
The great red sun
With unspeakable drama
Has lifted itself above the horizon,
Spread fire over endless sea and Heaven
To start this day
That I have shredded to senseless bits
With my tongue.*

FEEDING STATIONS FOR BIRDS
(Two Kinds)

*The delicate lady
Who feeds the wild birds
At four separate stations,
Has also, near her barn,
A shining modern house
For domestic hens.*

*Of these, some fattening for market
Are not permitted to walk;
Others cherished for fine white eggs,
Live in the glare of electricity,
Never see dusk or night.*

*The lady has a tender heart,
Knows every hidden tint
Of the wild bird's wing,
Knows their songs.*

*But the useful hens
Packed off to market,
Worn out with egg-laying,
Do not see themselves as less beautiful
Than the chickadee or speckled thrush —
Birds are birds,
They only want to live
Without undue attention
Of bird-lovers.*



Printed in Limited
Edition

(This Copy is of 500 Copies)

The University of Louisville
Established 1798

Hortense Flexner was a member of the distinguished Flexner Family of Louisville, Kentucky, which included Abraham, the medical educator, Simon the scientist, and Morris the doctor.

She married Wyncie King, eminent cartoonist, satirist, artist and social critic. Both worked on Louisville newspapers and moved to Philadelphia, where Miss Flexner taught at Bryn Mawr, and to Bronxville, where she taught at Sarah Lawrence College.

The University of Louisville conferred upon her, after her return to its city, two years before her death in 1973, the degree of Doctor of Literature. Hers is the only degree ever conferred by the University at an off-campus site.

This posthumous publication is the University's and her friends' way of paying tribute to a lady who "... sang well in her eighties without trickiness, blares, or screeches of metaphor."



reprinted with permission of the *Courier-Journal* and *Louisville Times*, photographed by Robert Steinau.

Published privately at the
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky 40208

Jacket design by r.d.n.

